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OTHER VOICES

Telecom reform could improve education

As a professor at a community college in southeastern Michigan, I can attest to the fact that telecommunications technology is transforming the education field.

Over the past several years, our school introduced programs in the computer technology field such as Internet protocols and online learning technology. The best news is there is much more to come if Congress makes modern telecom reform a legislative priority.

Despite some rumblings in the House of Representatives, the Senate seems unconcerned with our nation's dated telecom regulations. That's unfortunate considering that an updated U.S. telecom policy has the power to galvanize local economies and deliver a wealth of advanced services.

If all telecom companies were free to compete and invest as the market demands, our country could turn around its sinking global broadband deployment ranking, which recently fell to 16th place from a fifth place standing five years ago. Improvement in this area would not only help America regain its reputation as an Internet pioneer, this technology would also help small businesses expand, yielding new jobs nationwide. Broadband holds limitless educational potential, connecting students to considerable worldwide learning opportunities, some of which have barely been dreamed up yet.

I was pleased to read a recent study that proved that students with broadband access make better grades. Forty percent of parents who sign up for broadband service are doing so to help their children with their homework, and it turns out they're seeing a good return on their investment.

In some classrooms, students are already experiencing the wonders of watching the Archaeology Channel's "digable" films from the Acropolis to the Yucatan, as well as a range of live National Geographic adventure programs courtesy of their schools' high-speed Internet connection. These types of opportunities will become more widely available if a truly competitive telecommunications marketplace prevails, one in which all companies go head-to-head inventing and investing vigorously regardless of the technology they use.

Equally important, a revised telecom policy must require all industry players to support the Universal Service Fund — which plays the critically important role of providing schools and libraries with Internet connections.

I hope U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow will see the vast potential of telecom reform and lead her colleagues toward a policy that produces a robust telecommunications marketplace with cutting-edge tools for my classroom and much more.

RON ROBINSON

Warren